FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
September 30, 2001

God's Love and the 12 Apple Brown Bettys
John M. Buchanan

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.
Attributed to Francis of Assisi

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE TWELVE APPLE BROWN BETTYS
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 86:1-13
Luke 15:11-24
Jeremiah 8:18–9:1

A Prayer for Mental Illness Month: Out of the depths we cry to you, O God. We pray today for those who suffer mental illness. Comfort and encourage them with your love. We pray for those who minister to them—the physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, and social workers. We pray for their families who stand with them and support them. And we pray for our church, that we may be to the mentally ill—and to all your people—a safe haven, a place of grace and acceptance and encouragement. Now startle us again with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your love; in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Is there no balm in Gilead?

When William Sloan Coffin Jr. was the chaplain at Yale, his college-age son, Alex, died in a car accident. Alex and his friends had been drinking; on the way home, he missed a turn, crashed through a barrier, and plunged into the icy waters of a river north of Manhattan. After the memorial service, a woman, wanting to be helpful, said something about what happened being the will of God. Coffin wrote later, "I wanted to grab her and say—'Lady, that's wrong. God didn't cause this. It wasn't God's will that my son die. None of us knows enough to say that. God doesn't go around the world hurting and killing people. When the waters closed in over the car, the heart of God was first of all our hearts to break.'"

There are two basic responses to human tragedy and suffering, whether on a grand scale, such as we have been experiencing as a nation after September 11, or as individuals, as we encounter personal loss and tragedy.

The first, in some way, is to hold God accountable for it. God actually orchestrated it, did it, carried it out—in order to teach us a lesson, or to punish us for our misdeeds, or to deliver a wake-up call, or to make us stronger, better people. That response is as contemporary as the two televangelists agreeing that the September 11 tragedy was something we deserved or, at least, it was something God allowed by "lifting the veil of protection around us." And it is as old as the book of Job, in which Job's friends try to explain his suffering as a result of his moral failures. God blesses the righteous with good things and punishes the unrighteous. So if you've lost your business, home, and all your children, obviously you've done something terribly wrong and you

ought to be on your knees in sackcloth and ashes confessing and repenting of whatever it is and begging God's forgiveness. Job, by the way, doesn't buy it.

I do not mean to make light of this response. Anyone who has ever sustained serious personal loss has asked the question and at least entertained the notion that somewhere there is a cause-and-effect principle at work. Nor do I mean to trivialize the very real dynamic of human complicity in tragedy and suffering. Smoke cigarettes, and the odds are you're going to die prematurely of lung disease. Enslave people, and it will be centuries before the remnants of evil disappear from the culture. Glorify violence, feed it to your young on television along with their breakfast cereal, produce movies that assault the senses with exploding buildings, burning cars, strong men and women with megaweapons, and then put guns in easy reach of youngsters, and you'll have a lot of personal and societal tragedy.

I do not mean to trivialize human complicity in suffering. I do mean to point out that although the Bible gives voice to people who express the idea that God does bad things to us, just like Bill Coffin's would-be comforter suggested, the Bible finally rejects it. Job, ultimately, prefers silence, the mysterious silence of God, to the explanation of his friends.

The second response to tragedy and suffering is more complex. It is despair. In biblical and theological terms, it is the conclusion that God has turned his back on us, God has abandoned us, *Deus Abscondus*, the old theologians called it. We have felt it, too, in the midst of intense personal loss and the searing pain of grief, standing by a dear one dying—"Where is God? God is not here. God has abandoned me." "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" the psalmist asked and Jesus cried as his own life ebbed away.

God's absence—people have experienced it and expressed it all the way back to that formative time in our faith tradition, Israel's exile in Babylon at the beginning of the sixth century B.C. The situation is this: God's people, chosen and blessed by the Lord of the universe, are living happily and prosperously in the land that God has given them, a land flowing with milk and honey. Their kings are strong and just, their crops plentiful, their borders secure—up until now, that is. Now everything has fallen apart. All the old certainties are gone. The old security has been shown to be an illusion.

The most powerful despot in the world, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, has sent his army south to obliterate Israel and Judah, to lay siege to Jerusalem, the capital, Zion—the place of God's presence and the symbol of God's power. Then the worst happens. The siege of Jerusalem succeeds. The people give up. The Babylonians enter the city, destroy it, and drag all the survivors away through the burned-out rubble of the beautiful capital city, past the ruins of Solomon's glorious temple, through the battlefields to see the skeletons of their soldiers—all the way back to Babylon, where they will live in captivity.

Elegant poet that Jeremiah is, his words say for the people what they have no words of their own to say:

> My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.

And he asks the age-old question that every one of those people asked, the same question you and I ask and have asked in the past three weeks:

> Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion?"

Translate that, What happened to our God? Why has God abandoned us? Why, if God is God, why if there is a God, has this happened to us?

It is beautiful poetry.

> "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

It was time for Rosh Hashanah—the New Year and the Festival of Booths, when families and pilgrims gather at the temple for a glorious celebration of harvest and prosperity. But not this year. Is there no balm in Gilead—Gilead, a district to the north known for it's aromatic and curative oils and ointments? Is there no balm in Gilead, no physician there?

But, also, in the midst of this powerful lament, the voicing of humankind's most desperate fear: that God is absent, that we are finally and ultimately alone. In the midst of that heavy, oppressive, and depressing litany, did you hear the prophet's voice becoming the voice of God?

> For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
> I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me

God is not absent at all. God is not present, as the people have come to expect—as a heavenly choreographer arranging storms and invasion and plagues, always protecting God's people. God is not present as divine protection. God is present in the grief and despair. God feels it too. God takes into the very heart and soul of God, the pain and suffering of the people. It is the first glimmer of the light of the incarnation. The first early glimpse of the idea, the word that became flesh in a baby in Bethlehem, the early sense that in Jesus Christ God will come into our darkness, to stand with us and bind up the wounds of despair and strengthen and renew and restore broken spirits and broken hearts.

There is a balm in Gilead.

It was the great theologian Paul Tillich who resurrected the old concept of "sin–sickness" and reinterpreted it for the modern world. "Where the ancients felt sin-sick," he wrote, "I feel only the absence of meaning. Where the psalmist felt threatened, I felt alienated. Where Luther felt impinged upon by a too-near God, I feel abandoned by a too remote God" (quoted in Martin Marty, *A Cry of Absence*, p. 107).

That is the sin-sickness of modernity: a sense of loss of God, a sense of abandonment. There come "seasons of abandonment," Martin Marty wrote in a book about his own suffering and loss. Cancer sufferers feel abandoned by God, them embraced by God when remission happens, then the final abandonment of God with reoccurrence. And at that moment, Marty wrote, the Christ of

"insufferably sad but not depressing," in fact, an inspiring scene because "in human terms, ground zero is a vast web of bustling goodness and acts of kindness from an entire planet."

It seems that Gould, his wife, and stepdaughter had established a kind of streetside depot to collect and deliver to the site items in short supply—facemasks, shoe inserts, hard hats, and batteries. As they were leaving a neighborhood restaurant, late to make one last delivery, the cook gave them a shopping bag. "Here's a dozen apple brown bettys, our best dessert, still warm. Give them to the rescue workers."

How meaningless, Gould thought, but they agreed to make the delivery and put the bag of twelve apple brown bettys atop several thousand facemasks and shoe pads.

"Twelve apple brown bettys into the breech."

Gould reflected,

> I learned something important that I should never have forgotten—those twelve apple brown bettys turned into drops of gold within a rainstorm of offerings for the stomach and for the soul, from children's postcards to cheers from the roadside. We gave the last one to a firefighter, an older man in a young crowd, sitting alone in utter exhaustion as he inserted one of our shoe pads. And he said, with a twinkle and a smile restored to his face: "Thank you. This is the most lovely thing I've seen in four days, and still warm!" (*New York Times*, 26 September 2001)

There is a balm in Gilead.

It is made of love: God's love in Jesus Christ that does not abandon us but experiences our loss and grief with us, love that will never let us go, love that lives and heals and restores in simple, miraculous acts of human kindness.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

the cross—the crucified victim who cried out in his abandonment—comes close. "He was the true derelict," Marty wrote. "The rest of us die in company, his company. Never again is aloneness to be so stark" (p. 139).

The Christian word to suffering, grieving people, the Christian word for this time, this place, this situation, is not that God did it, or allowed it, but that God is in it with us. How do you know that? We know it because of him, Jesus the Christ, God incarnate, the light that shines even in darkness.

The Christian word to suffering and grieving people is a resurrection word. Evil and death did all they could and a good and faithful man was crucified, and in three days he rose and evil and death were defeated. Nothing will separate us from his love. The Christian word is a word of hope.

How do we participate in it? How do we experience it at the same time we are experiencing our grief and our own sense of abandonment? I think we are given the gift of experiencing the life and hope—the balm in Gilead—when we live out some of the love from which nothing will ever separate us, when we receive it in the form of someone else's love, and when we extend it in acts of kindness.

Viktor Frankl recorded for posterity how the dehumanizing cruelty of Auschwitz was neutralized, denied its victory, by the relentless propensity of the prisoners to be kind, to share their bread and water. He wrote later about a particularly dreadful moment when all seemed lost, when hatred seemed to have won: "A thought transfixed me. The truth that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which we can aspire. . . . The salvation of humanity is through love and in love" (*Man's Search for Meaning*).

I thought a lot this week about what we have been through and continue to go through and the emotional and spiritual fallout. I thought about the ways human beings cope with and handle tragedy and loss by holding God accountable for it or by concluding that God has abandoned, departed, absconded. I thought about sin-sickness as having to try to live with that sense of abandonment and how so many of us are depressed and discouraged and I wonder if we can survive what has happened in any recognizable way. And I thought about how in the midst of all the indescribable sadness, human beings never gave up, people kept extending help, giving money, donating blood, children drawing pictures, writing poems. How life seems suddenly a little softer, gentler, how clerks say "Thank you" and toll-takers on the Skyway actually smile and say "Have a nice day." And I thought that there is something deep inside us that responds to evil and suffering—with kindness and love.

I thought about how God's infinite kindness was exposed in an act of love—"For God so loved the world"—and how acts of human kindness always contain and convey something of that love. And I thought about those Twelve Apple Brown Bettys that I read about last week.

Stephen Jay Gould, professor of zoology at Harvard and popular science writer, had a piece in the *New York Times* last week. Gould has been to ground zero in lower Manhattan, a scene